Walter Bouman
John Buchanan

I think about Walter Bouman a lot, but particularly on the first Sunday of Advent every three years, when Isaiah 64:1-9 shows up in the Lectionary:

> Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
> so that the mountains would quake at your presence -
> to make your name known to your adversaries

Walt preached on that text once and one of his students who happened to be on the staff of the church I was serving at the time, the Broad Street Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Ohio, gave me a copy. "I think you're going to like this," she said, and I did. In fact, it is the best, most winsome Advent sermon I ever read or heard and I have been using it shamelessly for thirty years. I am always careful to attribute it to Walt and make him part of my sermon, which is easy to do. Walt began his sermon by referring the congregation to a contemporary literary resource with profound theological meaning; Children's Letters to God. [Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall, Workman Publishing]

Dear God,

Are you really invisible or is it just a trick?

Lucy

Dear God,

Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.

Joyce

Dear God,

Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother.

Larry

Walt said his favorite was a profound Advent prayer:

Dear God,

Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are you better do something quick.

Harriet Anne

It is the oldest prayer in history. It was surely prayed by the exile community living in Babylonian captivity, trying to make sense of what had

happened to them. Their humiliating situation called into question everything they had been taught and believed about their chosenness. The defeat of their army, the destruction of their holy city and, most of all, the devastation of the temple, the heart of their identity as God's people, prompted some of the most poignant poetry:

> By the rivers of Babylon-
> there we sat down and there we wept
> when we remembered Zion…
> On the willows there
> we hung up our harps.
> For there our captors
> asked us for song,
> and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying
> "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
> How could we sing the Lord's song
> in a foreign land? [Psalm 137]

Paraphrasing Second Isaiah, Harriet Anne prayed a prayer people have been praying since the beginning of time. Dear God…you better do something quick.

Walter Bouman's deep, luminous faith, grounded in God's grace and the incarnation, Word become flesh, informed his compelling Advent proclamation that God, indeed, has done something in human history. It was not the dramatic tearing open of the heavens that the prophet asked for. Rather, it was the birth of a child, Emmanuel, God with us.

And so, I remember Walt every time I ponder the mysterious, provocative message of Advent: that God has come, and does come and continues to come into the life of the world to reconcile and redeem and save. And every year as I experience the warmth, joyful anticipation of Advent, I find that I am left, finally, with the reality Walter Bouman understood and advocated for and personally lived – the Church of Jesus Christ, the Body of the incarnation, the community through which God chooses to continue the long, irresistible process of saving the world. The Church!

He was a great churchman, a big, robust Lutheran with a sweet spirit and a winsome worldliness that would have made Luther himself proud. He was, quite simply, the best teacher I ever experienced, with an uncanny ability to convey intricate, complex ideas in ways people could understand. His sense of humor helped, of course, as did his understanding of the issues confronting the world. People responded not only to his obvious erudition but his authentic, energetic humanity was well. We invited him regularly to teach in the Adult Education program at Broad Street Presbyterian and he was an all-time favorite. Every time we advertised a presentation by

Professor Walter Bouman we knew we would need to set up extra chairs in the hall. A prominent Columbus orthopedic surgeon, and a church member, remembers that Walter was a mesmerizing teacher, that the hall was packed whenever he taught, that he always began with a story or two, always very funny, but always with an appropriate entry to the topic of the day. During pastoral transitions Walter preached from the Presbyterian pulpit and on one occasion the Church's Adult Education Committee proposed that honorary Presbyterian membership be extended to him. The surgeon, J. Richard Briggs, and his wife Marilyn, became friends with Walter and Jan and when Walt became ill, visited both in the hospital and at home. Dick recalled his last visit with Walter just two days before he died. The hospice nurse and Jan were in the room during the visit. The conversation was not easy, Walter was not very responsive. But suddenly, when Dick asked a question, Walter became alert, fully responsive and fully conversational and launched into what Dick remembers as a 15-minute elegant description of Christian faith. Dick said he thought he was privileged to hear Walter's final theology lecture delivered from the bed in which he would die in 48 hours.

Walter had a big theology and an equally big ecclesiology. Ecumenism came naturally to him, and grew out of his deep sense of the wideness of God's mercy and the unconditional gift of God's grace.

I will not add here to the current ecclesiastical hand-wringing and obsessive analysis over the crisis of the church in our day, particularly the Mainline Protestant Church. Lutherans are not always included in the literature about the Mainline. But Walter Bouman spent enough time in a Presbyterian Church and other congregations to qualify as a card-carrying Mainliner. In regard to the Mainline situation, I particularly like Phyllis Tickle's "Rummage Sale" metaphor. Every five hundred years or so, she proposes, the church undergoes the ecclesiastical equivalent of a rummage sale. Old, worn-out, obsolete stuff is discarded and moved out in order to make room for new stuff. Beginning before the Common Era, every five hundred years major change happens. There is some kind of major shift, a break from the mainstream that at the time is experienced as tragic. In fact, what has happened at half-millennial intervals is that a new structure emerges. In response the old structure renews and reforms itself and the two move, on parallel tracks, into the future. It has happened twice in the last millennium: the split between the Eastern and Western church and emergence of Eastern Orthodoxy: five hundred years later the Reformation and the emergence of Protestantism and Counter Reformation Roman Catholicism. If Tickle is even close to correct, and I believe she is, we are in the midst of an ecclesiastical Rummage Sale and it is not clear yet what exactly will emerge from it. There are hints – in the Emergent Church Movement, the Presbyterian 1001 Worshipping Communities project of the PC(USA) and other, often ecumenical initiatives.

Whatever new form of church is born will be incarnational in terms of its love for and deep involvement in the life of the world. It will not be much interested in the old denominational identities but committed to the oneness of all believers. It will be inter-faith in terms of its openness to the world's amazing racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, grateful for the religious tradition and practices of all the world's people.

I think I see a hint of what is coming in the family of one of my adult children. He is a Presbyterian. She is a Roman Catholic. Their three daughters attend a Catholic parochial School, and they attend the parish church when they are not in Sunday School and worship at the Presbyterian Church. They were baptized in the Presbyterian Church and had their first communion in their Catholic Church, a wonderful liturgical celebration in which I participated at the invitation of the Parish Priest. I don't know how many ecclesiastical rules were broken when I gave the bread to my granddaughter, kneeling with fifty other third graders and said: "Lilly: The Body of Christ broken for you," but I was profoundly grateful. They don't know and don't seem to care about all the historic reasons Roman Catholics and Protestants have found not to worship together, have argued and demeaned when they weren't fighting and killing one another. The three of them exhibit a wonderful, grace-filled, post Roman Catholic/Protestant Christianity, a church truly "catholic," like the one Jimmy Breslin described when he said about any church that calls itself catholic: "here comes everybody."

Two of our families are impatient with their church because, until recently, it was not very welcoming to a daughter and sister because of sexual orientation. When my adult children heard that I was off to another meeting to talk about sexual orientation they used to say, in unison: "Dad, are you still talking about that? Don't you know that the world has moved on? It's not an issue anywhere else anymore."

Robert Putnam and David Campbell in American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us, confirms their sentiment. Young adults, Putnam and Campbell argue, leave churches and become part of the "nones," i.e. people who answer "none" to pollsters' questions about religious preference, because of what they are hearing and seeing about religion in the media: harsh, self-confident to the point of arrogance, exclusivist, trivial, negative and judgmental about sexual issues particularly sexual orientation, and downright mean.

Whatever church emerges out of this rummage sale will have gotten past the public battle over "hot-button" issues and will be as shockingly open to the world and as radically inclusive as its Lord was. The church that emerges will be radically open to other religious tradition, a lot less obsessive about guarding its traditions and getting its rules and doctrines right than it is about getting Jesus right when he sat down at table and

broke bread and drank wine with all sorts of people, particularly those who were regarded as unfit and unclean.

And, I pray that whatever church emerges will take its essential, Christ-centered unity half as seriously as he did. It will be a church that remembers and, in its practices, expresses some of his last words:

"Protect them, holy father, that they may be one, as we are one…that they may all be one so that the world may believe you have sent me." [John 17:11, 20] According to Jesus, ecumenism is anything but a liberal agenda. Rather it is central to the evangelical mandate: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciple, if you have love for one another." [John 13:34]

The new ecumenical frontier will be interfaith. Hans Kung famously said that there will be no peace among nations until there is peace among religions, and there will be no peace among religions until there is dialogue among religion. The future calls the church to a new openness. The urgent demands of peace call the church of Jesus Christ to an acknowledgement of truth larger than anyone's particular truth.

University of Chicago Professor of Modern Jewish History and Thought, Paul Mendes-Flohr, reminds all people of faith that we are called to something beyond tolerance: that Goethe said, "To tolerate is to insult – tolerance is not far from indifference." We must now acknowledge that within any monotheism there is a tendency toward intolerance and worse. The challenge before all people and communities of faith, Mendes-Flohr argues, is to maintain "fidelity to the theological positions and values of one's own religious community, while acknowledging the cognitive and spiritual integrity of other faith communities." [Criterion, University of Chicago Divinity School, Spring/Summer 2013, Frank Rosenzweig]

In the midst of appalling violence, if not between religions, at least perpetrated by extremist adherents of one religion or another, it is clear that we really must stop the old tradition of trying to eliminate one another by conversion or persecution, and death. Mendes-Flohr calls for "dialogical tolerance," a path of mutual acknowledgement and understanding, without compromising one's own faith commitment.

The church that emerges in the future will be grounded in something more than those creeds and doctrines and dogma that so frequently have been barriers that divide, something more than revelation as a disclosure of intellectual truth, but rather a disclosure of Divine presence. The church that emerges will represent a religion that seeks and trusts the mysterious sacred among us all. It will understand that Jesus Christ came into the world not to give us better beliefs but God's presence, God's essence, God's love.

We can't even begin to talk about that until we get our own unity right, "that they may be one so that the world might believe."

Is there a more urgent priority and more poignant pleas than this, written 2,000 years ago from a prison cell?

"I, therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you were called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace." [Ephesians 4: 1-3]

It is a singular moment. Sitting in a filthy jail cell Paul has a vision of a new humanity God has created, in which old divisions are healed, and walls of hostility are broken down and all things are reconciled and united.

Distinguished New Testament scholar Marcus Barth used to say that "Make every effort to maintain unity" is much too mild. The Greek, Barth said, is urgent, passionate, a full intellectual, spiritual and physical effort. "Do it! Do it now! Do whatever it takes to get it done."

Walter Bouman, in his teaching ministry and his life honored that magnificent and urgent hope, for the Holy Catholic Church, and the world and the whole creation.

Walter's friendship was a precious gift. His warmth and laughter, his deep faith and profound understanding, deepened my own faith and stretched my vision. His genuine love for God and devotion to the Church of Jesus Christ, and his obvious joy in the Resurrection, enriched my life.

Thanks be to God.